

# ACTA Survey: Illinois education bureaucrats out of step with the public

Citizens of Illinois strongly support free speech and do not favor politicizing K-12 education

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*A majority of respondents favor equipping teachers to develop core skills and competencies over the encouragement of progressive political activism. Illinoisans also favor a curriculum that focuses on “American founding principles and . . . documents” over one that incorporates key tenets of the New York Times’ 1619 Project. At the postsecondary level, strong majorities oppose reducing police presence on campus; support viewpoint diversity; favor a merit-based application process; and prioritize reducing the cost of tuition over expanding diversity and equity programs. The telephone survey of 800 Illinois residents also found that while over two-thirds of respondents agree that “freedom of speech and open deliberation is the foundation of our democracy,” 64% report that they have stopped themselves from expressing their opinion on controversial issues “often” or “sometimes.”*

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In recent years, public debate has intensified on issues related to K-12 social studies curriculum, diversity and inclusion policies on college campuses, free and open debate in higher education, and self-censorship in our wider society. The *New York Times’* 1619 Project regularly makes headlines, as do efforts to revise public school curriculum and teaching standards. Most recently, an Illinois Department of Education rule mandating “culturally responsive teaching and learning standards for all Illinois educators” stirred national controversy. An early version of the rule required candidates for teaching licenses to “embrace and encourage progressive viewpoints and perspectives,” and the final regulation includes several pages of language that encourages teachers to advance social justice priorities. (For example, “The culturally responsive teacher and leader . . . is aware of the effects of power and privilege and the need for social advocacy and social action to better empower diverse students and communities.”)

To understand the views of Illinoisans, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) commissioned eighteen<sup>92</sup>, national pollster with extensive experience in Illinois, to survey n800 Illinoisans about current trends in K-12 and higher education, as well as broader issues related to free speech, self-censorship, and cancel culture. Interviews were conducted February 17-21, and respondents were reached by a combination of cell phones and landlines. Thirty-nine percent of respondents affiliated with the Democratic party, 27% identified as Independents or with a third party, 25% affiliated with the Republican party, and 9% were unsure. The poll’s margin of error is 3.46%.

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## Illinoisans reject the politicization of public K-12 education.

The ACTA-eighteen<sup>92</sup> survey found limited support for politicizing K-12 public education along the lines proposed by the Illinois Department of Education. Presented with two views—“K-12 teachers should work to expose students to a variety of perspectives about the country’s founding and history, and to equip them to think critically about its successes and failures” and “K-12 teachers should embrace progressive viewpoints and perspectives when teaching U.S. history, to encourage students to advocate for social justice causes”—Illinoisans opined against using the classroom for progressive political activism by a wide margin, 62% to 23%.

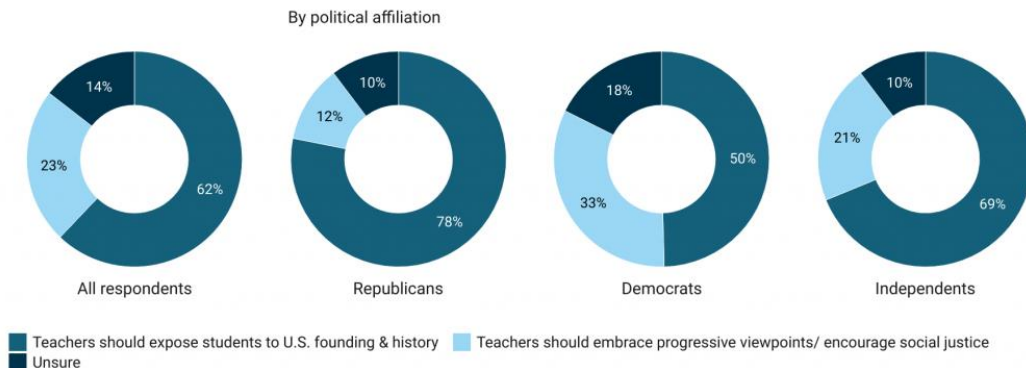
- The view was shared by a plurality of Democrats (49.6%) as well as majorities of Republicans (78%) and Independents (69%).

## Views on K-12 Social Studies Curriculum by Party Affiliation

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

"K-12 teachers should work to expose students to a variety of perspectives about the country's founding and history, and to equip them to think critically about its successes and failures" OR

"K-12 teachers should embrace progressive viewpoints and perspectives when teaching U.S. history, to encourage students to advocate for social justice causes"



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: ACTA • Source: ACTA survey of 800 Illinoisans on trends in K-12 and postsecondary education • Created with Datawrapper

Illinoisans expressed limited support for a key tenet of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, which aims to “reframe the country’s history” by putting slavery and its enduring consequences “at the very center of our national narrative.” Forty-eight percent of respondents favored a focus on “American founding principles and . . . documents,” compared to 38% who favored “new curriculums that teach children to understand that America is founded on slavery and remains systemically racist today.”

- Democrats and Republicans split more significantly on this question. Eighty-one percent of Republicans answered that K-12 should focus on founding principles, while 59% of Democrats said K-12 should teach that America remains systematically racist today.
- Among Independents, 54% favored a focus on founding principles and documents, with 36% favoring the new progressive curriculums.

## Views on New Curriculum Aligned to the NYT's 1619 Project

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

"Our K-12 schools should institute new curriculums that teach children to understand that America is founded on slavery and remains systemically racist today" OR

"K-12 schools should focus on teaching students about American founding principles and the documents that established the first free and democratic country in the world"



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When it comes to teacher preparation programs, a majority (57%) of Illinoisans answered that the focus should be “on making teachers better equipped to help students develop core skills and competencies,” compared to 34% who answered that teacher training programs should “prioritize teaching progressive viewpoints and social justice advocacy.”

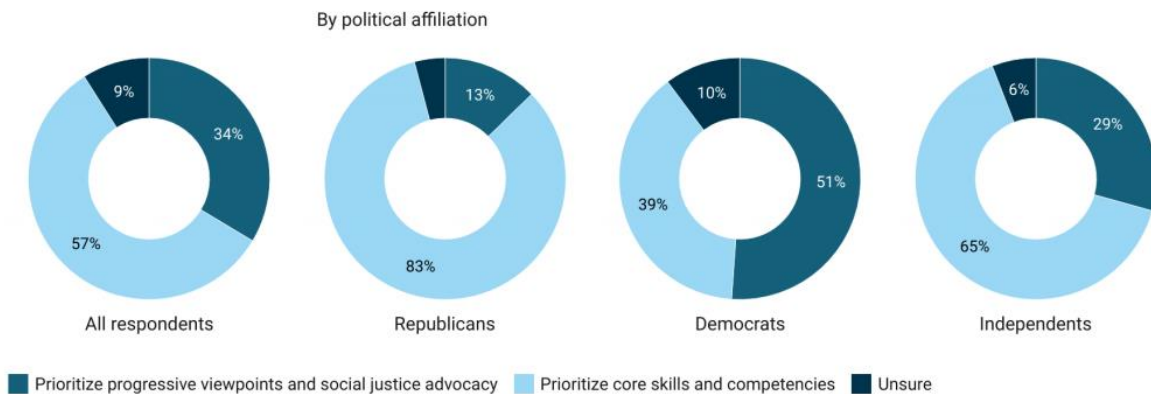
- Eighty-three percent of Republicans and 65% of Independents favor equipping teachers to help students develop “core skills and competencies.”
- A majority of Democrats (51%) favor teacher preparation programs that “prioritize . . . progressive viewpoints and social justice advocacy,” compared to 39% who favor preparing teachers to help students develop “core skills and competencies.”

### Views on the Focus of Teaching Preparation Programs

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

"Teacher preparation programs in Illinois should prioritize teaching progressive viewpoints and social justice advocacy, to help teachers overcome their own biases and build more inclusive classrooms" OR

"Teacher preparation programs in Illinois should focus on making teachers better equipped to help students develop core skills and competencies, not on social justice or progressive politics"



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Levels of satisfaction with public schools are fairly low in Illinois. Six percent of respondent answered that the K-12 public education system is doing an “excellent” job, compared to 38% who said “good,” 29% who said “not so good,” and 19% who said “poor” (for a net “good or better” difference of -4%).

- Higher numbers have favorable opinions of their local school board (46%), teachers unions (52%), and police officers (68%).

### Illinoisans do not support common diversity and equity policies and practices on public campuses.

A resounding 84% of respondents said that “all people should be treated equally on merit” when the question was posed in general terms. When asked to think about the college admissions process specifically, 63% answered that “all people should be treated equally based on merit, even if that results in less racial diversity at selective colleges and universities,” including 89% of Republicans, 62% of Independents, and a plurality (47%) of Democrats.

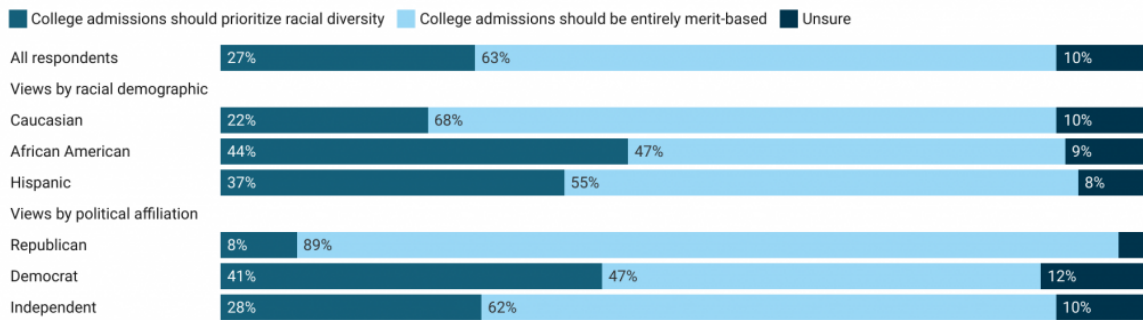
- Twenty-seven percent preferred the alternative, that “it is appropriate to prioritize racial diversity in the student body even if it means accepting some students with lower grades and test scores,” including 41% of Democrats and 28% of Independents.
- A plurality (47%) of African American respondents expressed a preference for merit-based admissions decisions, compared to 44% who indicated a preference for prioritizing diversity. Hispanic respondents favored merit-based policies by a somewhat larger margin, 55% to 37%.

### Views on Prioritizing Diversity in College Admissions

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

"During the college admissions process, it is appropriate to prioritize racial diversity in the student body even if it means accepting some students with lower grades and test scores" OR

"During the college admissions process, all people should be treated equally based on merit, even if that results in less racial diversity at selective colleges and universities"



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

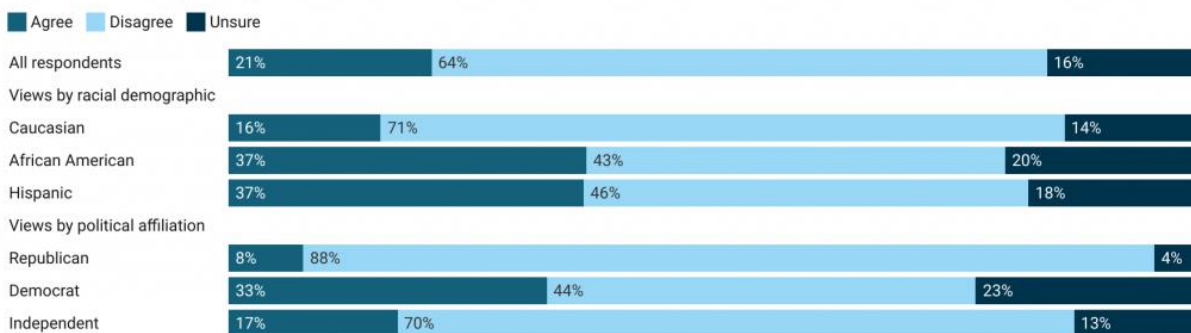
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There is little evidence that the diversity training programs commonplace on college campuses today are popular with the general public. For instance, 64% of respondents disagree with mandated diversity training that encourages white students and faculty to “acknowledge they are inherently racist,” including 88% of Republicans, 70% of Independents, and 44% of Democrats.

- Pluralities of African American and Hispanic respondents disagreed with training programs that encourage white participants to acknowledge their inherent racism.

### Views on Diversity Training that Encourages Acknowledgment of Inherent Racism

White students and professors at American colleges and universities should be encouraged to acknowledge they are inherently racist as part of mandated diversity training



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Illinoisans place higher priority on reducing the cost of college than on additional investment in diversity and inclusion programs. Overall, 54% of respondents agreed that public universities should “prioritize lowering tuition, even if it means cutting funding to diversity and inclusion programs.”

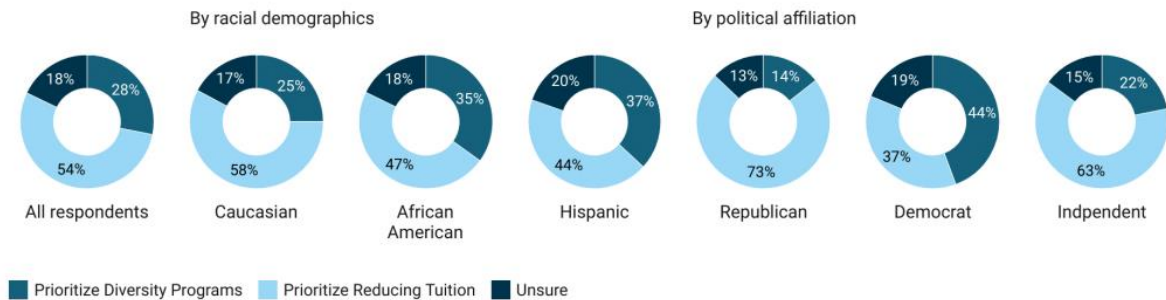
- While Republicans (73%) and Independents (63%) broke strongly in favor of prioritizing tuition reduction, a plurality of Democrats (44%) agreed that “public universities should spend more money on diversity and inclusion programs, even if it means tuition will go up.”
- Pluralities of African American and Hispanic respondents answered that lowering tuition is more important than increasing funding for diversity and inclusion.

### Views on the Relative Priority of Tuition Reduction and Diversity Expenditures

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

"Public universities should spend more money on diversity and inclusion programs, even if it means college tuition will go up" OR

"Public universities should have policies in place against discrimination but should prioritize lowering tuition, even if it means cutting funding to diversity and inclusion programs"



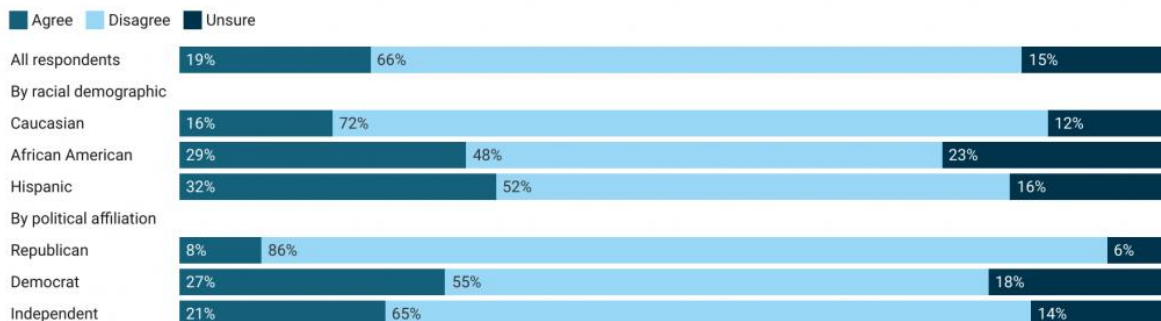
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Illinoisans across the political spectrum disagreed with the statement that “the presence of police officers on college campuses does more harm than good and should therefore be reduced.”

- Large majorities of Republicans (86%), Independents (65%), and Democrats (55%) joined majorities or pluralities of Caucasian (72%), African American (48%), and Hispanic (52%) respondents in opposing the idea that campuses would benefit from a reduced police presence.

### Views on Reduction of Police Presence on College Campuses

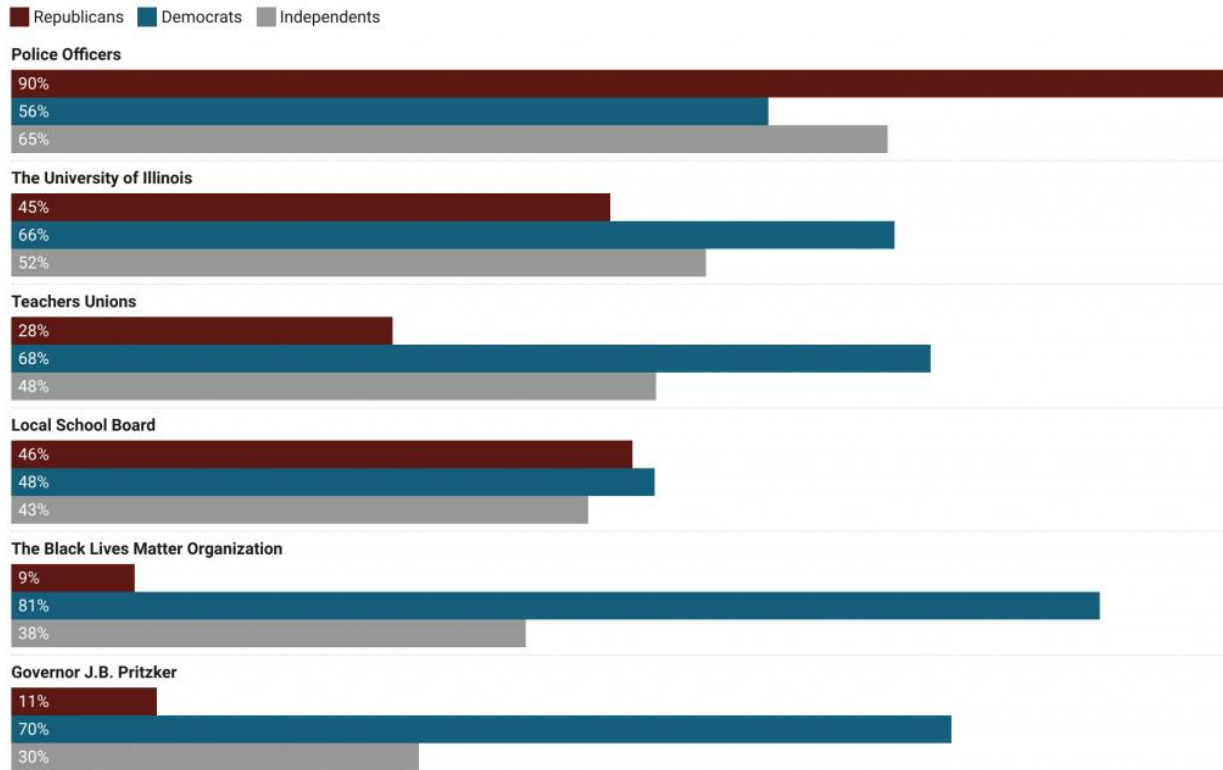
"The presence of police officers on college campuses does more harm than good for students and should therefore be reduced"



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The survey also found that 68% of respondents have a favorable view of police officers in general, which is higher than favorability ratings for Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker (41%), the Black Lives Matter organization (48%), the University of Illinois (55%), and teachers unions (52%).

### Favorable Impression by Political Affiliation



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## Illinoisans believe public universities should protect and encourage freedom of expression, disagree with using public funding for institutions that tolerate anti-Semitism, and prioritize civics education.

Efforts to disinvite controversial speakers and movements to rename buildings and tear down statues confirm what recent student surveys have revealed: Freedom of expression and open debate are under siege on college campuses. ACTA’s survey found that Illinoisans highly value viewpoint diversity, with 69% of respondents agreeing that “the University of Illinois should do its best to promote a balance of conservative and liberal faculty,” including 79% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats.

## Attitudes on Viewpoint Diversity Among the Faculty

"The University of Illinois should do its best to promote a balance of conservative and liberal faculty"



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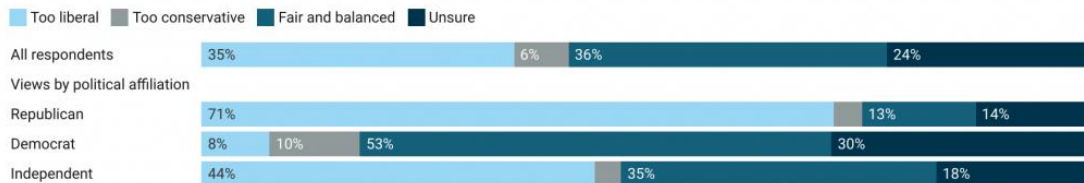
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By more than a five-to-one ratio, Illinoisans who perceive an ideological tilt in the way that Illinois universities teach students say they are “too liberal” (35%), compared to 6% who answered “too conservative” (36% said “fair and balanced”).

- The survey detected high levels of partisan disagreement on this question. Seventy-one percent of Republicans said public universities are “too liberal,” compared to 10% of Democrats who think universities are “too conservative.” Independents were most likely to answer that universities are “too liberal” in the way they teach students (44%), followed by “fair and balanced” (35%) and “too conservative” (3%).

## Perceived Ideological Tilt at Illinois Public Universities

"Do you think public universities in Illinois are too liberal, too conservative, or fair and balanced in the way they teach students?"



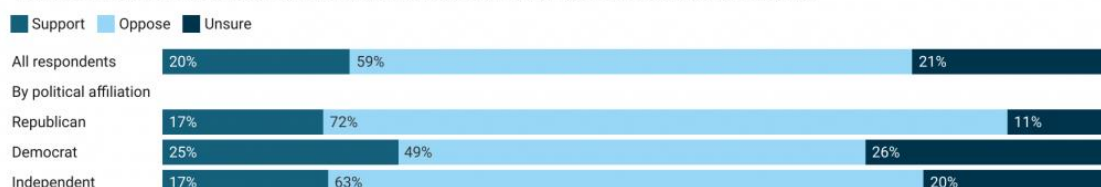
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The survey also found broad bipartisan opposition to efforts to restrict viewpoint diversity on campus. Fifty-nine percent oppose “efforts to prevent speakers from expressing opinions that some members of the campus find offensive,” including 72% of Republicans, 63% of Independents, and 49% of Democrats.

## Views on Efforts to Prevent Speakers from Expressing Offensive Viewpoints

"Efforts to prevent speakers from expressing opinions that some members of the campus find offensive"



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By an almost two-to-one margin, respondents who ventured an opinion agreed that “obstructing Jewish students from expressing support for the state of Israel is a form of anti-Semitism.” Seventy-three percent of respondents agreed that “taxpayer funds should not support public universities that tolerate any form of anti-Semitism.”

### Views on Taxpayer Funding for Universities that Tolerate Anti-Semitism

“Taxpayer funds should not support public universities that tolerate any form of anti-Semitism”



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Illinoisans believe lawmakers should take an interest in the climate for free and open debate on taxpayer-funded campuses. Sixty percent agreed that “the state legislature should fund programs at the University of Illinois that promote viewpoint diversity.”

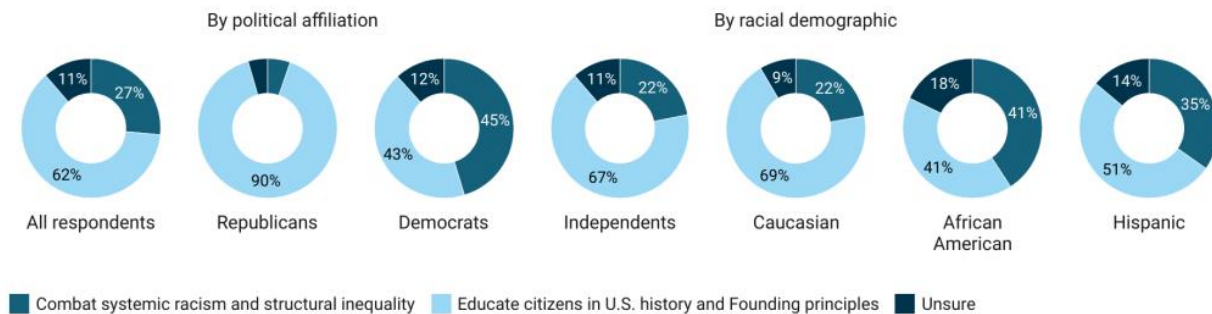
Illinoisans also believe that higher education should be concerned with civic literacy. When asked which view is closer to their own—that public universities should “work to educate citizens in U.S history and founding principles as the basis for reasoned debate and civil dialogue” or “work to combat systemic racism and structural inequality”—majorities of Republicans (90%) and Independents (67%) prioritized education for civic literacy, while Democrats favored combating systemic racism by a narrow margin (45% to 43%). A plurality of African American respondents, and majorities of Hispanics (51%) and Caucasians (69%), said that prioritizing U.S. history and founding principles is closer to their view.

### Views on Teaching about Systemic Racism and U.S. Founding Principles

Please Indicate which is closest to your own view:

“Public universities should work to combat systemic racism and structural inequality by teaching students about white privilege” OR

“Public universities should work to educate citizens in U.S. history and founding principles as the basis for reasoned debate and civil dialogue”



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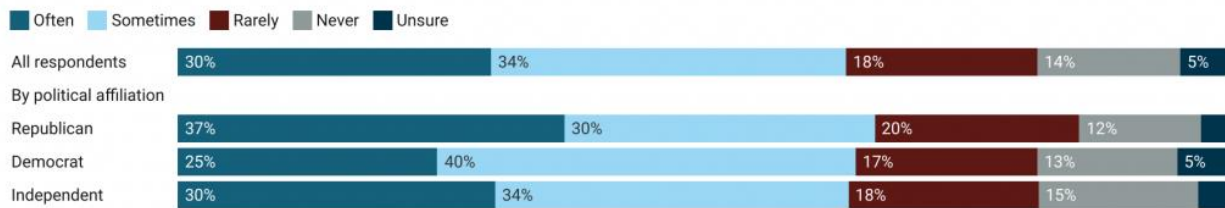
## Illinoisans report high levels of self-censorship but favor free and open deliberation.

National surveys have repeatedly shown that political correctness has silenced important discussions—among students on college campuses and in the broader marketplace of ideas. The ACTA-eighteen92 survey suggests that the same is true in Illinois, where 64% of respondents reported that they stop themselves from expressing their opinion on controversial political and social issues “often” (30%) or “sometimes” (34%), with an additional 18% doing so “rarely.”

Republicans were most likely to report self-censorship, with 37% doing so “often,” compared to 25% of Democrats.

### Frequency of Self-censorship by Political Identification

“How often, if ever, do you stop yourself from expressing your opinion on controversial political and social issues?”



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Of those who reported self-censoring, 22.4% said the main reason they do so is because they are worried about unfair criticism, while 22.0% answered that they are “worried about professional or academic consequences” for saying the wrong thing.

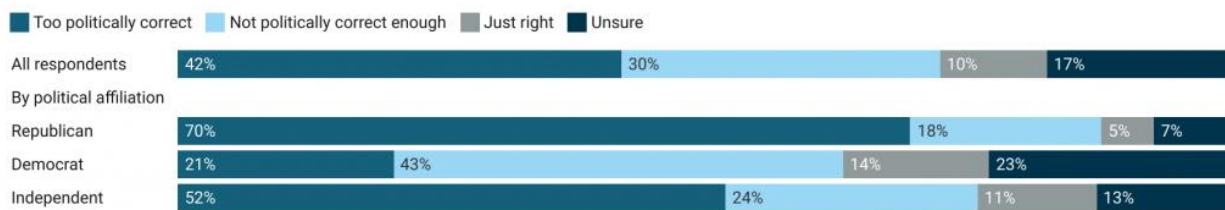
- A majority of Republicans who self-censor cited concerns about being criticized unfairly (42%) or worries about professional consequences (20%) as their main reasons for doing so.

A plurality of respondents (42%) answered that, generally speaking, Americans are “too politically correct.”

- This includes 70% of Illinois Republicans, 52% of Independents, and 21% of Democrats. Democrats were most likely to answer that Americans are “not politically correct enough” (43%).

### Views on Political Correctness by Political Affiliation

“Generally speaking, do you think Americans are too politically correct, not politically correct enough, or just right when it comes to political correctness?”



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Large majorities support free and open deliberation, and low numbers support efforts to suppress constitutionally protected speech that some find offensive.

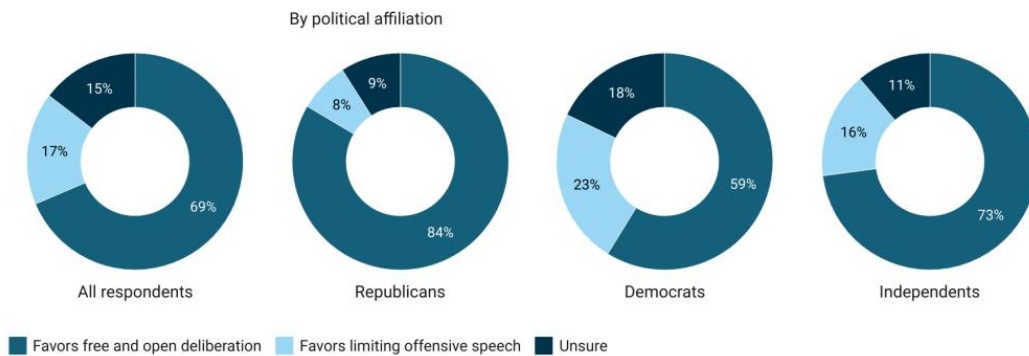
- Sixty-nine percent of respondents, including 84% of Republicans, 73% of Independents, and 59% of Democrats, agreed that “freedom of speech and open deliberation is the foundation of our democracy” and that “differing views and ideologies should be discussed in public, even if that means tolerating viewpoints that some people find offensive.”
- The alternative view, that “not all speech protected by the First Amendment should be tolerated in society” and that offensive “discussion should be limited,” found low levels of support across the political spectrum.

### Views on Limiting Speech Considered Offensive by Political Affiliation

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

“Freedom of speech and open deliberation is the foundation of our democracy. Differing views and ideologies should be discussed in public, even if that means tolerating viewpoints that some people find offensive” OR

“Not all speech protected by the First Amendment should be tolerated in society. If a person of color says an issue or argument is offensive, discussion should be limited even if no one intended to cause offense”



Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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## A majority of Illinoisans think fighting racism means ensuring equality of opportunity, with some demographics prioritizing “equal outcomes.”

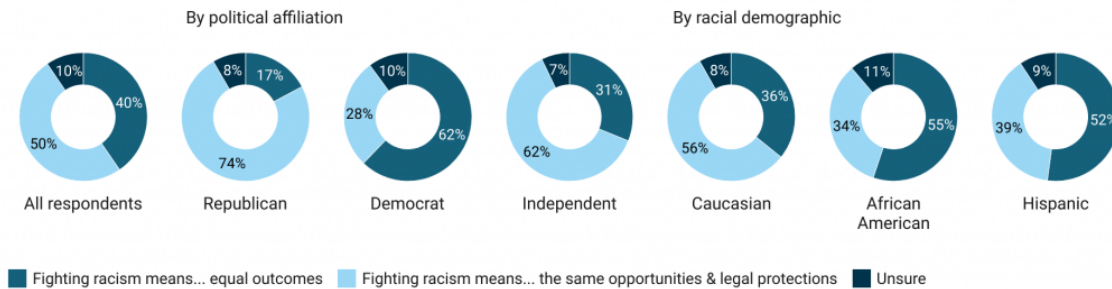
Presented with two alternatives—“Fighting racism means using government to make sure that people of all races have equal outcomes” when it comes to salaries, employment rates, and collegiate acceptance rates and “fighting racism means making sure that everyone . . . has the same opportunities and equal protection under the law”—a majority (50.1%) selected the latter view, compared with 40% who preferred the first.

## Views on the Meaning of Fighting Racism

Please indicate which is closest to your own view:

"Fighting racism means using government to make sure that people of all races have equal outcomes – including the same average salaries, equal employment rates, and equal acceptance rates at colleges" OR

"Fighting racism means making sure that everyone regardless of race has the same opportunities and equal protection under the law – but it's not the government's role to mandate equal outcomes for everyone"



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Minority respondents were more likely to answer that fighting racism means working toward “equal outcomes” rather than “equality of opportunity,” with African Americans splitting 55% to 34% and Hispanic respondents splitting 52% to 39%.

Issues related to K-12 curricular content, campus free speech, and cancel culture are likely to remain salient with voters in Illinois and around the country. Those making and implementing policy have strong reasons to pay attention to public opinion. The ACTA survey reveals strong support for traditional approaches to public education, including civics education focused on the country’s founding and history at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels, teacher preparation programs focused on helping primary and secondary students to develop core skills and competencies, and efforts at colleges and universities to safeguard campus speech and encourage viewpoint diversity. Support for using public schools to encourage advocacy for social justice causes and the notion that America remains systemically racist today was limited in comparison and concentrated among Democrats. Similarly, the survey found relatively low levels of support at the postsecondary level for reducing police presence on campus, increasing expenditures on diversity and inclusion, encouraging white faculty and students to acknowledge inherent racism, and the prioritization of racial diversity in college admissions decisions.